

# Creative learning and creative teaching and the new curriculum

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Bruce Hammonds wrote on his Sunday 5th August blog on the subject of creative learning and teaching and the legendary Elwyn Richardson.

Both are favourite hobby horses of mine so Bruce's blog triggered some reflection on the opportunities presented by the 'new' curriculum to teach for deeper, more interesting and more creative learning - learning that involves students, engages them, fascinates them challenges them, gets them exploring their own physical and mental worlds.

Bruce cites the 'new' curriculum view of students as 'active seekers, users and creators of their own knowledge.'

He sees these and other 'new' ideas as 'more old wine in new bottles'.

I prefer to see it as an indictment of the fragmented, hideous Curriculum Statements which hijacked a generation of learners and teachers - and many teacher educators and PD developers.

Will a slimmer curriculum lead to a renaissance in creative teaching and learning? This assumes that what has been preventing us from teaching creatively, and students from learning creatively, is the aforesaid fragmented, bloated curriculum statements. I've been around long enough to believe in simple panaceas. I'll explore four concerns and draw on Elwyn's work to translate them into four (of many) ways of contributing to creative learning.

1. Firstly, despite losing some weight I think the 'new' curriculum added to the myriad of 'things' we do ( and see as a 'must' in the school year) is still obese. There will still be too much to do, too much fragmentation, too much superficial 'splattergun', once-over-lightly learning. Teachers are driven by all the things they have to do, and continue to have to do. We are too busy-busy-doing stuff to ask the one question that I think should drive every classroom, all curriculum planning and PD. How well, how deeply and how creatively are the children in my classroom learning? What evidence do I have other than that we are 'getting through' the curriculum and our classroom is a bright, happy learning environment?

2. I think Bruce makes a valid point when he talks about visiting "numbers of classes with lots of ICT 'bling' and 'higher-order thinking skills' but with few products of genuine creative teaching to be seen." What I wrote about, talked about, moaned and groaned about FIFTEEN years ago is still evident - the folly of equating the use of ICT with 'creative' learning. Teachers insisting that children's education is deficient if they haven't got their own blogs. Give us a break. Since when is blogging, per se, an example of creative learning? Surely it depends on the content of the blog, the ideas and the opinions of the blogger. For example, Bruce's blog was worth reading because it had clearly expressed, relevant (to teachers) opinions and solid content (a summary of some of Elwyn's key ideas on creative learning and teaching). But not all blogs are created equal. Remember GIGO - garbage in, garbage out?

One of the few things children learn at school that they are unlikely to learn elsewhere is that ideas, opinions, claims grounded in evidence are better (yes, better in terms of academic learning, business and daily life and the media) than vacuous, unsubstantiated, ego-driven, often inaccurate and biased waffle parading as info, ideas and opinions. So blog away, possums, but don't confuse the medium with the message, and don't assume that the use of technology equates with creative learning or teaching.

3. Thirdly, with the new curriculum in itself influence our expectations? When I read Elwyn's work what strikes me forcibly is his expectation that each and every child in his class had the potential for creative learning. But far from having expectations and hoping that children would live up to them., Elwyn's mastery of creative teaching encompasses his ability to turn expectations into precision and detail, tools and rules, modelling - showing and telling - providing feedback that is precise, positive and gives shape and form to the processes of creative learning - exploration, experimentation and transformation. When teachers do too much, cover too much, it is inevitable that while adopting inclusive language, "We did this, we did that, we talked about, we shared ...," the classroom is teacher driven. Bruce talks about the problem today being "too much teacher input with: exemplars, criteria,

objectives, testing, imposed 'intentions' and formulaic teaching leading to well done but hardly creative products" and concludes "the teachers role become benignly oppressive." But nor is 'creative, child-centred' learning the simplistic response taken when teachers let children choose what they want to learn and leave them alone (facilitation!) to do it. This represents the freedom to fail, not the carefully guided freedom Elwyn provides to help children draw deeply on their own internal and external environments and experiences, make mindful choices about medium and method, and experiment and explore within the boundaries of medium and method.

4. This leads to my fourth concern. I think that it is simply not possible to make expectations and creative learning explicit and concrete if one has never experienced truly creative learning oneself. Creativity isn't what happens when children are given a task and resources in a supportive learning environment. Freedom + materials + time + encouragement and somehow the creative juices will flow? Nonsense! Creativity in ANY field or sport is inevitably the result of a slow process of learning the discipline, the rules and tools of that field or sport. Creativity is a transformative process using (and transcending) rules and tools. (It's a deep process, but not boring and dull). Will teachers with extra time provided by slimmer curriculum coverage confuse depth with 'doing topics to death slowly'? Creative depth coexists with playfulness because it results from Elwyn's processes of exploration, experimentation and transformation.

5. Finally, consider that creativity might be influenced by the teacher's mental attitude to learning and the current climate in schools. If teachers are excessively task driven ("These are all the things I have to do, all the 'stuff' I have to cover") which is inevitable in a busy-busy- do-more-climate, it is highly unlikely that time will be given to two of Elwyn's key considerations – mindfulness and playfulness. To create ideas, understandings, knowledge requires more than just the usual topic > questions > go-and-find-out> paste up-some-disparate-facts – manually or electronically recipe that passes for 'inquiry'. Creative thinking is not about using de Bono's hats. Creative learning happens when learners are given the models, the time, the encouragement to play with their ideas, to consider what their minds are doing and can do it with the raw material they feed in – to stand aside from their minds to become 'mindful' thinkers and learners. Creative learners enjoy playing with ideas and exploring, playfully, the process and content of their learning.

So how can we extrapolate some pedagogy from these concerns that reflects Elwyn's 'best practice' and fits the environment of the slimmer 'new' curriculum.

1. Curriculum planning: The only antidote to the "we are so busy, busy busy we must be learning" syndrome is whole school curriculum planning. I don't mean inflated documents full of the pedagogical equivalent of motherhood and apple pie and a large dose of wishful thinking.

- a) I mean a tight one or two page document with no computer graphics and salacious colour, written in plain English, outlining WHAT each teacher will teach in a term based on the 'new' curriculum.
- b) I mean asking WHY it is important that children of this age spend time learning this stuff. (If it isn't worth learning, why bother?)
- c) I mean (despite the lack of skills in the 'new' curriculum) an outline of the skills that must be taught (not just assumed to be used) during the term, and outlining methods for documenting the answer to the questions I asked above: How well, how deeply and how creatively are the children in my classroom learning? What evidence do I have other than that we are 'getting through' the curriculum and our classroom is a bright, happy learning environment.

In other words, curriculum planning should focus on WHAT are children going to learn, and HOW we will describe or measure that learning so that we (and the children) themselves know WHAT they have learnt, HOW and WHY. If the focus from the top (the principal) is learning- focused and infuses curriculum planning at whole school level and individual teacher level. It is infinitely harder for teachers to adopt the task focused, teacher driven pedagogies which run contrary to creative learning.

2. The technology of learning: see ICT 'bling' and band wagons like higher order thinking skills for what they are – potentially creative tools if the learning process itself is creative. The learning horse needs to pull the technology cart, not the other way round. Learning itself is a technology – children need to learn the language of learning, the rules and tools that make learning work. When learners understand how to harness literacy and cognitive tools, and how to mine their own rich internal

and external experience and environments in a process of building understanding, insight and knowledge, a variety of materials and technologies can be exploited creatively/

When it comes to resources we see more as better and children as deprived without technology-based information. Nonsense. START with the environment they live in. Teach them as Elwyn taught his children, to look and see, really see, and give them the vocabulary to describe the richness of what they observe. DON'T let them run to the internet as a default response when you ask them to 'find out.' Presenting information is not the be all and end all. Negotiate the best way, the best medium and method, to demonstrate and apply the knowledge and skills they've been building.

3. Expectations: Most teachers would claim they had high expectations. We are good at making expectations of classrooms behaviours explicit but do we assume that general expectations of learning behaviours and attitudes is enough – expecting children to do their best, show persistence, etc?

Elwyn's mastery of creative teaching encompassed his ability to turn expectations into precision and detail, tools and rules, showing and telling and providing feedback that is precise, positive and gives shape and form to the process of creative learning. This means that expectations of children's learning have to be made specific. THIS DOES NOT MEAN TELLING THEM WHAT THEIR LEARNING INTENTIONS ARE. Learning intentions are what each learner intends to learn, not what the teacher intends them to learn by intending to teach them.

Do what Elwyn suggests to make learning expectations explicit: Show children that you value precision and detail, demonstrate tools and rules, model – show and tell – particular skills and provide feedback that is precise and positive. In other words, give shape and form to the process of creative learning – exploration, experimentation and transformation. Show children (talking aloud as you do so) how to make mindful and self-conscious choices about medium and method. Allow them time to experiment and explore within the boundaries of medium and method. Acknowledge the importance of their own internal and external environments and experiences, and let them look at the world around them in all its variety and beauty, talk to the people around them, respecting their wisdom and experience (not just asking pre-set 'questions' after brainstorming).

4. Making rules, tools and processes explicit: If creativity is a transformative process using rules and tools as well as the three processes – exploration, experimentation and transformation – teachers need to model (like a master builder teaches an apprentice) the rules, the tools and the frameworks, the skills and the processes for exploring their inner and outer worlds, the world of documented information (including libraries and the internet) for experimenting and for transforming what they see and hear into their own clearly articulated responses using a variety of methods and media.

Teaching them doesn't mean giving them tasks and access to resources and technology hoping that by doing the task they will learn the tools, the rules, the skills and the processes. Not so! There is no research to support this 'learning by default not design' pedagogy. Any teacher who has done my 3Doors © programme will recognise what I say when I claim that most teachers confuse their knowledge of teaching tools with what children understand about what learning tools are and how they use them for different types of learning. It comes as a shock how often tools have to be used before children internalise and own them. Knowing the tools, the rules, the processes are pre-requisite scaffolds for creative learning. Without the structure and discipline provided by these scaffolds, learning tends to be direction-less, mind-less – formless and formless.

5. Mental models: As Elwyn suggests mindfulness and playfulness are integral to creative learning. Creative learning happens when learners are given the models, scaffolds, time and encouragement to play with ideas, to consider what their minds are doing with the raw material they feed it – to stand aside from their minds to become 'mindful' thinkers and learners. We need to give them models, scaffolds, time and encouragement to explore what their minds are doing and how their minds are doing it. This does NOT mean that we hand out templates of so-called graphic organisers. It means encouraging an attitude of mindful playfulness by encouraging learners to explore and extend their thinking, their ideas, their opinions, and helping them to analyse, synthesise and interpret their knowledge but many teachers don't teach these skills – just assume they arise in learners in the course of 'doing' learning tasks – 'learning by osmosis'.

Mindfulness is not enough. The whole idea of playfulness is integral to creative learning and thinking.

When time is short and teachers are task focused, playfulness is sacrificed on the altar of 'finishing' so we can move onto the next topic. Many 3Doors© teachers struggle to apply the 3Doors mantra – 'little, light, frequent, fun.'

Teachers introduce the rules and the tools with a light touch, in a game-like way, ideally stopping and coming back to the same tools the same day, the next day, the day after, so that children learn and internalise them incrementally, handling them playfully but mindfully, seeing little-by-little for themselves what the tools do, how they work.

Play isn't fun. It isn't a waste of time; it's integral to creating and creativity.

2008

Start your curriculum planning for 2008 by asking yourselves, as individual teachers and as a whole staff what creative learning looks like and feels like.

Try to describe it, not using platitudes and 'teacher-talk' clichés but in plain language as if you were explaining it to your grandma.

Consider

- 1) Your curriculum planning
- 2) Your use of cognitive and information technologies for supporting learning
- 3) Your expectations for children's learning
- 4) How you make rules, tools and processes concrete and explicit for learners and finally
- 5) Your own mental attitude to learning. Think about how you can use each of these to build a creative learning environment in 2008.